

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION (1980 PRESS NOTES)



Filmmaking on a grand scale returned to Rome with the making of the Bob Guccione/Penthouse Films International production of *Caligula*. This bizarre but true tale of the young Emperor whose reign began benignly in 37 A.D. and ended in cruelty and violence four years later in not a romanticized picture postcard version of Imperial Rome.

The production utilized the entire facilities of the huge Dear Film Studios on Rome's Via Nomentana and spilled over into mammoth open air settings constructed on the city's outskirts where over a mile of first century Roman streets was erected with public buildings, shops and private dwellings as well as a huge recreation of Tiberius' pleasure grotto on the Isle of Capri, a massive Roman sports arena and a special boat to be used as the Imperial Brothel. How to ensure the privacy of such a vast enterprise was a major security problem. The answer was to close the set to all except a select group of journalists and photographers.

As a result, rumors circulated as to the sexual content of the film from the first day of shooting in August until the last day of shooting in December 1976. Was it true the extras were auditioning for their roles in the erotic scenes? Were they really participating in orgies that were so much a part of Caligula's day? And were the major stars joining them?

The project was born when Bob Guccione met Franco Rossellini, who had the idea of filming the story of Caligula. Guccione, who had made several successful film investments, wanted to produce his own movie – one in which he could combine the elements of establishment filmmaking with “underground” filmmaking. The story of the depraved Roman Emperor Caligula seemed like a perfect vehicle.

“For the first time, the erotic decadence of First Century Rome is dramatized on the screen as realistically as its opulence and splendor has been shown in epics like *Cleopatra* and *Ben Hur*,” says Guccione.

The Guccione/Rossellini team hired major actors for the key roles in the film. Malcolm McDowell is the mad Emperor Caligula; Peter O'Toole portrays the

wicked Emperor Tiberius, mentor of Caligula; John Gielgud is the noble Roman Senator Nerva, friend and confidante of Tiberius; and Helen Mirren, one of England's finest Shakespearean actresses, plays Caesonia, Caligula's wife and mistress. Three-time Academy Award-winner Danilo Donati designed the sets and costumes for the \$17 million spectacular.

Guccione introduces two Penthouse Pets – Anneka Di Lorenzo as Messalina and Lori Wagner as Agrippina – plus casting a host of Penthouse beauties from Great Britain, Europe and the United States as the women of Imperial Rome.

Malcolm McDowell spent five months filming in Rome. One of his more formidable scenes was shot in bed with a horse. In the film, Caligula awakens from a nightmare to find not his mistress beside him, but Incitatus, his horse. The 8-year-old stallion had to be tranquilized, then brought to bed where an understandably nervous McDowell was waiting. To calm both human and animal, soothing lullaby music was provided during the scene.

Peter O'Toole spent three hours a day being transformed from a lean, handsome blue-eyed blond into the aged, diseased, wicked-looking 77-year-old Emperor Tiberius. Special makeup and adhesive fluid were imported from Hollywood, Wales, London, Paris and even East Berlin to reproduce Tiberius' features as they appeared on existing coins and busts.

Sir John Gielgud, one of Great Britain's most distinguished actors, plays yet another death scene in *Caligula*. This time, he takes his life in a reddish-brown marble bath. Steam discharges from vents and flaming braziers illuminate and heat the large room. It's a dramatic moment achieved with the special dignity only Gielgud could bring to the role.

Helen Mirren, who portrays Caesonia, was brought to the *Caligula* project by Malcolm McDowell. "My most difficult scene was a ménage à trois with Malcolm and Teresa Ann Savoy, who plays his sister Drusilla," says Mirren. "We were comforting the Emperor after he had a nightmare and got carried away – as did most Romans of that time," she continues. The set was closed except to the few technicians needed for lighting, camera and makeup.

The producers wanted to accurately depict the excesses and extravagances of Caligula. They chose Academy Award-winner Danilo Donati, the genius behind the sets of Fellini, to recreate the look of Caligula's Rome. He designed the largest studio prop ever built for a motion picture – a gold-leafed boat, over 160 feet long and 30 feet high, decorated with more than 100 intricately designed statues and 120 oars. Never meant to sail, the ship served as the Imperial Brothel in Caligula's palace, where he employed the wives and daughters of his senators. Another of Donati's incredible creations is the private stadium of Emperor Caligula. An open-air set that covers an area of three football fields, it is Donati's most elaborate and largest set. The stadium incorporates a moving "killing machine" 40 feet high and 120 feet wide. According to historians, Caligula invented this machine to destroy his enemies in a unique and bizarre manner.

The film uses 64 sets and 3,592 costumes, Malcolm McDowell alone has 26 costume changes. Each costume, whether for noble or peasant, involves

accessories or leg-tie sandals, belts, buckles, necklaces and intricate hairstyles and ornaments. All artifacts were made by hand. One man from Siena supervised the cutting and hand-stitching of more than 2,000 pairs of sandals and military boots. A celebrated Hungarian sculptor headed the reproduction of thousands of statues, urns, goblets and plates. The man in charge of props had the task of creating 450 gallons of blood, 20,000 eggs and a quarter of a ton of rotten tomatoes – all for one scene. Old prints and drawings of strange ancient Romans – tattooed slaves, wrinkled crones, deformed persons – were duplicated in rubber faces and body masks.

Casting for secondary principals down to the humblest soldier or most cringing slave was done with extraordinary care. Some 1,000 sturdy, tanned Roman youths and delicate-featured, full-breasted Roman girls were interviewed. The most promising were photographed, and from their ranks hundreds were chosen for special roles after being tested in costume and makeup and in sound on videotape. The older, more mature characters, the children, and the monsters and freaks which Tiberius and Caligula delighted to have around them were similarly cast.

After a long post-production period at Twickenham Studios in England – when over 600,000 feet of film was edited – *Caligula* will be released early this year. Its appearance on movie screens marks the beginning of a new era in filmmaking. *Caligula* will be the most talked-about film in 1980.